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Entangled Freedom: An Interview with Charles Johnson

On February 18, 2014, Charles Johnson had just returned to Seattle from a Black History Month speaking engagement. For someone who had braved “cold,” “icy,” “snowbound” Ohio and battled a twenty-four-hour virus, he was thoughtful, patient, and gracefully expansive.

Michael Hill: “The Weave” is different from many of your stories. Could you talk about the genesis of this piece?

Charles Johnson: This was one of the fifteen stories that I wrote over a period of fifteen years for a literary event here in Seattle called Bedtime Stories. It’s a yearly fundraiser for Humanities Washington, which was formerly called the Washington Commission for the Humanities. Let me answer your question at length, because the genesis of “The Weave” touches on some of your other questions about my life in Seattle and how I see the craft of writing literary fiction.

I was a trustee on the board of Humanities Washington in 1998. They asked me what committee I wanted to be on because every trustee had to serve on a committee. I asked them what committees were available, and director Margaret Ann Bollmeier replied that they were thinking of having authors give a reading to raise money for their literacy programs like “Mother Read/Father Read,” which helps adults with literacy problems learn to read right along with their children. That year I had just come off a six-week book tour for my novel *Dreamer*. So I was tired of reading already published work. So I suggested this: “Why don’t you, the members of the board, give a group of local writers a prompt or a theme and have them create a new work?” Margaret liked that idea. The first year the theme or “seed” was just “bedtime stories,” and I got some friends of mine, like August Wilson, to participate. Over fifteen years, many writers have composed new works for what has become the most exciting, creative, and imaginative literary event every fall in Seattle. Tom Robbins, David Shields, Tess Gallagher, Heather McHugh, and my former student David Guterson, to name just a few, have participated. The event expanded to Spokane two years ago, and Humanities

Washington produced an anthology of the best stories, titled *Night Lights* (available on Amazon), in which I have two stories. The event has become something of an institution now. By the time of last year's event, Bedtime Stories had raised a million dollars for literacy programs, and Humanities Washington presented me with its Humanities Washington Award.

There has been a different theme every year for this night of original storytelling. What I love about Bedtime Stories is that it makes me write a story that I would have never dreamed of writing on my own. I truly believe that a professional writer, like a medieval troubadour or a journeyman, should be able to create or recite an engaging, suspenseful story on just about any subject when called upon to do so. I believe a storyteller should have a robust imagination and be a cornucopia of creativity. I believe we should train our students and ourselves to be technicians of form and language. (My bachelor's degree is in journalism. I worked on newspapers in Illinois like the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Southern Illinoian*, filing three or four stories a week in the late '60s and early '70s, and as a columnist and editorial cartoonist; a journalist is trained to write a lot on many subjects. Long before creative writing programs arose after World War II, newspapers were where writers learned their craft and the standards of professionalism.) Half the tales in my third story collection, *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*, including the title story, were created for this event, and all have been published, with many of them frequently anthologized. One year the theme was "night watch," and for that I wrote a story titled "Prince of the Ascetics," a tale about the Buddha's six years as an ascetic before his awakening. Another year it was "night light," and for that I wrote a story, "The Cynic," about Diogenes and the collapse of ancient Athens after the Peloponnesian War, narrated by Plato.

The year I wrote "The Weave," the theme was "red eye." What I brought to that story—to that theme—was my interest in the billion-dollar beauty industry we've created in America, and how that industry negatively affects black women in terms of things like very expensive weaves. I did a little research, even though this issue of black women's hair (a really taboo subject!) is something I've observed since childhood. Joan, my wife of forty-four years, and I looked at, then discussed Chris Rock's documentary film *Good Hair*, and around the time I was composing that story someone in Chicago broke into a beauty parlor and stole several bags of weaves. That real event gave me the idea for the robbery in "The Weave." But the philosophical core of the story is a meditation on the (white) Western concept of beauty. The story is also about illu-

sion (I'm Buddhist so I think about illusion all the time), because the hair on the heads of these black women comes from Asia, specifically from young nuns who shave their heads in a ceremony where they renounce all vanity. Korean merchants control this commerce—not black people. They buy the hair cheaply, bring it to America, and it winds up on the heads of black women. Al Sharpton in *Good Hair* states that he feels those who buy weaves are literally wearing their racial and gender oppression on their heads. I was drawn to this subject because I see it as being filled with irony, historical and racial complexities, and unnecessary pain for black people. That was the genesis of “The Weave.”

MH: Fascinating. In the last twenty years, you have produced novels, essays, short stories, and literary criticism. Have you planned your excursions into these forms? Do you ever decide to go in one direction and to let another genre lie fallow?

CJ: I've never liked being intellectually or creatively boxed-in or pigeon-holed. I'm a trained philosopher (one of the few black ones to earn a PhD in philosophy in American history), a professional cartoonist and illustrator since I was seventeen years old, and a storyteller in many genres, including screenplays and teleplays. I just love to create, that's all. And all the arts share in common one thing: they are simply about problem-solving and discovery. That process of discovery and problem-solving has been my greatest daily joy in life since childhood.

The great challenge for me during my sixty-six years of life has always been to integrate everything I do. Last year, Beth Bacon, the book manager for my latest book, a children's story, brilliantly suggested that I bring everything I do together under a brand name. I chose the name “The Johnson Construction Co.” That brand name will appear on the title page of every book I do from now on. It refers to the all-black construction company of my great-uncle, William Johnson, our family patriarch, who lived to the age of ninety-seven, and during the 1940s through the 1970s built residences, churches, and apartment buildings all over my hometown of Evanston, Illinois, and the North Shore. I grew up seeing evidence every day of my family's creativity and industry. They literally built part of my hometown. Great-uncle Will was also the reason my dad, aunts, and uncles moved from South Carolina in the 1940s to Evanston—to work for him. There's a disguised version of my great-uncle Will in my novel *Dreamer*. There, he is called Bob Jackson.

I'm working right now on a series of children's books with my daughter Elisheba, and this is a tremendous pleasure for me. The series is

called *The Adventures of Emery Jones: Boy Science Wonder*, named after my two-year-old grandson Emery. Two years ago when my daughter asked me to do a children's book with her, I was eager to do so because for about thirty years I've had a character I wanted to create in the back of my mind, a young black scientific child prodigy. We have black child prodigies out there, but they are never portrayed in mainstream media. You see little white wunderkinds. You see Asian child prodigies. But you don't see black kids. (And something I just recently learned is that only about 1.8 percent of children's literature is created by black writers and artists. As Christopher Myers pointed out recently in an important *New York Times* essay, "The Apartheid of Children's Literature," we have a tragic situation where "children of color remain outside the boundaries of imagination." All we give them are stories about slavery and the civil rights movement, never tales of adventure with a protagonist they can identify with, who looks like them.) I wanted to see a rousing adventure tale in which the main character was a black kid who is a genius. The first book in this series, my twentieth book, is called *Bending Time*. On Amazon it's mainly received five-star reviews. *Publishers Weekly* and *The Economist* did nice features on the book in March and April, and one reason for that is because *Bending Time* is the first fiction collaboration by a black father and daughter. I also illustrated it. The artist we selected bailed out on us last July because of personal problems. I had eighteen days in August to do the drawings for the book. Really, it was night and day. And after that, my daughter talked me into doing one Emery Jones cartoon a week for a year, which she puts on Facebook and social media. It gives me a chance to draw again. And thanks to philosopher Michael Boylan (with whom I co-authored a book in 2010, *Philosophy: An Innovative Introduction: Fictive Narrative, Primary Texts, and Responsive Writing*), Marymount University is going to sponsor the creation of a calendar using twelve of these weekly cartoons, a calendar that highlights the birth dates and achievements of black scientists past and present, male and female, for K-12 students. As you can see, we want the Emery Jones series to get kids, and especially kids of color, enthusiastic about STEM education and fields, which both President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have been promoting as crucial for the twenty-first century. All the research for the calendar was done by Dr. Jim McWilliams, who is a literary scholar and the editor for a book of interviews with me, *Passing the Three Gates*.

MH: You mentioned Facebook as one facet of your engagement with social media. In 2011, you also collaborated on the E-Channel blog with

poet and Howard University treasure E. Ethelbert Miller. Could you talk about that project?

CJ: Sure. It was Ethelbert's idea to interview me for a full year. He asked me around 400 questions; I answered 218. Once we started in January, I realized that this project deserved more than just casual, quick answers to his questions. I found it necessary to write short essays in order to answer his questions fully, because they ranged over just about every subject under the sun. There has never been a book like this before. This project will be published as an e-book and in hardcover and paper in January 2015 by Dzanc Books. The title will be *The Words and Wisdom of Charles Johnson*. However, before that, Shambhala Publications will publish this November *Taming the Ox: Buddhist Stories and Reflections on Politics, Race, Culture, and Spiritual Practice*, another work from the Johnson Construction Co. This is a sequel to my earlier book, *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*, and consists of a decade of uncollected stories and articles I published in places like *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*; *Shambhala Sun*; *Buddhadharma*; *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Engaged Buddhism*; and the *International Review of African American Art*.

MH: Brander Matthews's scholarship drew James Weldon Johnson to Columbia, and his teaching deeply influenced Johnson's career. What role do you see such mentorship playing in an artist's development?

CJ: I think that mentors are extremely important. I've mentored several writers in the past and still do so today. I did a two-year correspondence course with cartoonist and mystery writer Lawrence Sanders when I was fifteen and sixteen years old. I began publishing right after that when I was seventeen, and that first career as an illustrator and cartoonist lasted for seven intense years of creative work, from 1965 until 1972. I published thousands of drawings, two collections (*Black Humor* in 1970 and *Half-Past Nation Time* in 1972), and created, hosted, and co-produced an early PBS drawing show called *Charlie's Pad* in 1970.

I began writing fiction—novels and stories—in 1970. And for that I had another important mentor, John Gardner, who looked over my shoulder as I was writing my seventh novel, *Faith and the Good Thing*, which was the first one published. I wrote six earlier novels on my own in two years (ten pages a day, five days a week, and one of those was an early version of *Middle Passage*), between 1970 and '72, and John was good for gently preventing me from making youthful errors in the seventh book. Another mentor would be my dissertation director Don

Ihde, a distinguished philosopher and phenomenologist at Stony Brook University, where I did my PhD.

MH: When you were in the classroom, how did you see yourself in relation to aspiring younger writers? Did you have a specific disposition that you wanted to achieve?

CJ: I did not teach creative writing the way that most people do. I had John Gardner briefly as a mentor, but I never took a college-level creative writing course. I was planning on teaching philosophy. But after I published *Faith*, the University of Washington offered me the opportunity to apply for a job during my third year in the PhD program at Stony Brook. My wife and I and our newborn son were living on my teaching assistantship, which in 1976 was four thousand dollars a year, so I needed a job. At the same time that they interviewed me, they also interviewed Clarence Major. I thought Clarence would get the job because he deserved it—I was a TA in philosophy with a ton of work in the visual arts, but at the time only one published novel, and Clarence was already teaching at Howard and had several very experimental books under his belt. But they hired us both in 1976 to teach black American literature and creative writing.

My sense of teaching creative writing is that we need to produce writers who are, first and foremost, storytellers. Writers who can take on any writing assignment tossed at them—like one of the Bedtime Story themes, for example—and do it on time, professionally, and give more than the person who gave them the assignment is asking for. I believed that the trial-and-error process of writing—creating—is the best teacher of writing. (As the old saying goes, ninety percent of good writing is rewriting; my ratio of throwaway-to-keep pages is often twenty to one.) During my thirty-three years in the classroom, I used writing craft exercises created by John Gardner—you can see them in his book called *The Art of Fiction*. My students would complete three exercises a week. I also made them write one fully developed plot outline a week (because writers typically tend to be weak on plot, which Gardner once accurately said is “the writer’s equivalent to the philosopher’s argument”) and three stories in a ten-week quarter. I made my students work very hard at specific literary tasks, and prolifically. There was nothing I hated more than a creative writing workshop that was intellectually soft, failed to teach technique, and boiled down to being nothing more than a touchy-feely therapy session. I demanded a lot from them, and many of them have gone on now to become published writers like David

Guterson, author of *Snow Falling on Cedars*. I've got former students all over the planet who are in their fifties now. I started teaching when I was twenty-eight, so I wasn't that much older than some of my students. In "A Boot Camp for Creative Writing," published in the October 31, 2003 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, I gave a detailed explanation of how I taught creative writing. That piece was later published in the March/April 2009 issue of *Writer's Digest*. Another aesthetic essay *Iowa Review* readers will find of interest is "Storytelling and the Alpha Narrative," published in the Winter 2005 issue of the *Southern Review*.

MH: Do you keep up with literary critics' assessments of your work? As studies like, say, Linda Selzer's *Charles Johnson in Context* appear, are you following the efforts of or interacting with academics?

CJ: There are about six literary studies of my work, and Linda Selzer's magisterial book is among the richest. Others are great, too, like Marc Conner's *Charles Johnson: The Novelist as Philosopher*, and the late Gary Storhoff's *Understanding Charles Johnson*. You know, I've done a great deal of literary criticism—writing about writers, book reviewing, and composing philosophical documents on literary aesthetics, like "The Truth-Telling Power of Fiction," a plenary paper I delivered last year for the philosophy department at Stony Brook, which was published, in part, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in December 2013. I don't see myself as being in a different camp from literary scholars. Writing about ideas and literature is what I do in my role as a philosopher. I read sections of Selzer's book before it was published. And Marc Conner, another of my former students who is now a provost at Washington and Lee University and secretary of the Charles Johnson Society at the American Literature Association, is contributing the introduction for *The Words and Wisdom of Charles Johnson*. Literary scholars are my colleagues, whom I'm in touch with every week, sharing ideas with them, working with them on different projects. I experience a great joy and gratitude from these associations.

MH: How did the Midwest influence your art? If you had to attribute parts of your artistic personality to the region, what would they be?

CJ: I'm very much a midwestern boy. The main character in *Middle Passage*, Rutherford Calhoun, is nicknamed "Illinois," because the first twenty-three years of my life were spent there. I'm not from the South and I don't much like that region because of its bloody history of slavery,

although my father was born and bred in South Carolina. I lived in the East when I went to graduate school on Long Island, but I never developed an East-Coast personality. I could never set a story on the East Coast because I don't know its "spirit of place," to borrow a phrase from D.H. Lawrence. I've lived more than half my life now on the West Coast, and Seattle has always been very agreeable to me. But on the lower levels of my being, I'm probably still a very midwestern guy in terms of my values. Midwesterners are not pretentious. When I was growing up, black and white midwesterners were proud, old-fashioned people, who valued things like family and hard work. They had a quiet spirituality and a strong moral compass, like my parents. Yet they were highly individualist and independent. And that's me, that's my early background, my personal default position.

MH: If the Midwest left those imprints, what about the Pacific Northwest? Does Seattle animate your writing?

CJ: You know, I still feel, even though I've lived here more than half my life, that I'm a transplant. I've written about this experience in two or three essays, most recently for *Newsweek*. I do set stories occasionally in Seattle because I've lived here so long. But there's a Seattle that people know who were born and raised here that I can't know. I don't claim to be a Northwest writer. I love Seattle, I really do. It's a very open place, a supportive place—a very progressive city. It's also an iconic city now, and my life is interwoven with its arts community. For example, my daughter works in Seattle's Office of Arts & Culture, and for six years she ran a business as owner and curator of Faire Gallery Café on Capitol Hill. Faire was a community arts space that featured poetry readings, play performances, paintings, a weekly open-mic night, and much more. People met their future husbands and wives there. During my final six years of teaching at UW, that's where I conducted my writing workshops. I know everyone here in the literary arts, and I've always volunteered my time and energy to support the arts locally (and nationally). But what happened before I got here is a whole other Seattle that only the natives really know. I mean, this place has changed so much since 1976. We now have the fifth-worst traffic among American cities. People "discovered" Seattle in the early '80s, and so many came here, and in many ways Seattle wasn't prepared for it, at least not in terms of the traffic problem. But it's a good place to create. I was talking recently to one of my younger colleagues, literary scholar Louis Chude-Sokei, who is editor for the reboot of *The Black Scholar*. I think he's been

here three years now, and he told me that he's gotten more work done in Seattle and at the University of Washington than at any place he's taught before. The Northwest is that kind of a place. People leave you alone if you want to be left alone to work, or they'll engage with you in the friendliest of ways if you want to be engaged with. That's the spirit of place in the Pacific Northwest. It's been an excellent place for me to live and work.